

she said, "O.K., Mr. Johnson. Let's see what you can do." Clete clenched his jaw and began his arduous walk between the bars. He knew, non-verbally, that to her he was just another frail, damaged old guy who was scared shitless that his life was fucked up for good. He'd show her; he'd come back, all the way, and then he'd try to fuck her.

A FEW WORDS, A TOUCH

Juanita spied an abandoned shopping cart and pulled the Buick into the empty parking space next to it. Clete's aluminum frame walker was in the trunk of the car, but he wouldn't be needing it; he could hang onto the shopping cart and Juanita could walk in front of it to act as a brake.

The right leg was still pretty spastic, but Clete could lift his hip and throw it out in front of himself and lock his knee and flop his foot down and take an efficient, if clumsy, step, and another and another and another.

Crossing the parking lot was exhausting; Clete had to sit on the planter box outside the store for ten minutes to regain his strength.

Inside the store, Juanita stayed in front of the cart. Clete pushed it — slowly and with difficulty, his dead foot slapping the shiny tile floor. The cart tried to get away from him, but Juanita's butt was always there to stop it.

They picked up some catsup, tortillas, diet cola, beer (Clete steered into the liquor department on purpose and stopped in front of a Budweiser pyramid and refused to move until Juanita put a twelve-pack in the cart), milk, coffee and ground beef.

The checker, who Clete always flirted benignly with, recognized him and said, "Hi, Mr. Johnson, you old stud-muffin. How you been?" Clete couldn't answer her. Juanita unloaded the cart. The girl took in Clete's unsteady, white-knuckle stance and the grim smile on his face and realized that things hadn't been too good for him. She reddened and remained as silent as her formerly flirty-but-cute old customer as she rang up the groceries.

As Juanita pulled the cart away from the register and Clete hung on and followed — as tired as he could be now and thinking that he might not be able to make it back to the car — the cashier left her register and came up behind Clete and wrapped her arm around his shoulder and pulled him close and whispered in his ear, "You're gonna make it,

Mr. Johnson, all the way back."

Had it not been for her words and touch, he would not have made it out the door. As it was, he was almost jaunty behind the cart as he and Juanita crossed the parking lot. Juanita got him settled in his seat and she went back inside the store and gave that girl a hard hug. When she got back to the car, Clete was sleeping like a baby.

ANDY WARHOL BLUES, Part 2

Benito Santiago, catcher for the San Diego Padres, smacked the first pitch of the seventh inning foul on the third base side. Ellis Leahy, sitting seven rows behind the dugout, jumped up, stretched tall, and snatched it out of its intended trajectory. The impact of the ball on his palm pulled his arm and shoulder back, altering his center of gravity enough to cause him to topple over his armrest and into the lap of the guy sitting next to him....

That guy was Clete Johnson, Ellis' next door neighbor. Clete was recovering from a stroke. He had quad-caned into the stadium from the handicapped parking space and settled in to watch the game. Ellis made the beer and hot dog runs.

Ellis fell into Clete's lap, crushing the three-quarters-full paper beer cup. The amber fluid dribbled down onto the cold, hard cement as Ellis held the ball aloft for the television camera. Clete grinned a lopsided grin and tried to mouth the words, "Hi, Juanita," to his wife who was watching the game at home.

GEOMETRY

The first post-stroke sentence that Clete uttered — and it seemed to have flitted in out of nowhere, out of the mishmash of random nouns he had managed to master — was this: "The cut on a grapefruit should be equatorial, not longitudinal." And he held up the mis-sliced fruit for the waitress to inspect.

Delores, the waitress, unaware of the importance and the accomplishment of that sentence, plucked the yellow fruit from his hand and said, "Yeah, O.K. I'll go getcha a new one."

When Clete's buddy Ellis returned from the bathroom he said, "Hey, I thought you had a grapefruit. You finish it already?" Clete struggled with the words bouncing around